Checkpoint

A Key Graphic Control Measure

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Field Manual 101-5-1, *Staff Organizations and Operations*, defines a checkpoint as "a predetermined point on the ground used as a means of coordinating friendly movement." What the manual does not say is that a checkpoint may often be a leader's key to synchronization. And it does not say that a checkpoint is too seldom used, along with the many other graphic control measures that facilitate command and control. This assertion is based on more than 20 rotations as an observer-controller at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). Time and again, I saw platoon leaders and company commanders develop courses of action and issue orders without applying adequate graphic control measures to assist command and control.

Although the checkpoint is only one of the many graphic control measures at a leader's disposal, it may be the most important. In addition to focusing maneuver, it can be used to call for and adjust indirect fire, direct casualty evacuation and resupply, coordinate linkups, and help prevent fratricide. The checkpoint is useful in every op

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eration a unit may conduct, but its importance is best shown in the fluid and changing environment of the low intensity conflict (LIC) phase at the JRTC.

Most operations during this phase are characterized by numerous small-unitpatrols, normally executed at pla-

toon or squad level for a variety of squad level for a variety of missions. These missions may include zone or area reconnaissance, ambushes, and security patrols. In some cases, platoons are also tasked to conduct search and attack operations. Unfortunately, units must often conduct these operations with too little time for planning, which leads to an abbreviated decision making process. In such instances, the leader may have only enough time to conduct an initial intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB), develop a restated mission, and come up with a very generic course of action (COA). In these situations, a checkpoint can be a leader's most valuable tool for making sure his COA is synchronized.

A security patrol can be used as a model to illustrate the use of check-

points to facilitate command and control. The scenario has a company in a patrol base planning for future operations.

A platoon is tasked to send a squad on a security patrol to locate and destroy opposing force (OPFOR) reconnaissance elements within their capability (three soldiers or less). The squad is given a sector and a time to return. A forward observer (FO) is not available for attachment to the squad, and the only radio the squad has is an AN/PRC 126. (Although this is not the ideal situation, it is quite frequent at the JRTC.)

The squad leader conducts his initial IPB and determines possible OPFOR locations and key terrain in his sector. He then designates the suspected OP-FOR locations as objectives and identifies a series of checkpoints along his route. The checkpoints are easily recognizable on the ground, and some are near trails or roads that are accessible by vehicle. Before leaving the platoon location, the squad leader backbriefs the platoon leader and provides him the graphics. The graphics are in turn given to the commander, the 60mm mortar sergeant, and the fire support officer (FSO).

During the patrol, the squad reports its location to the platoon leader by calling in the checkpoints. The squad leader reports any movement he hears or sees in his sector to the platoon leader. Using the checkpoint in the vicinity of the squad leader's location, the platoon leader checks with the commander to see whether any friendly patrols are in that area. If so, a potential fratricide incident is avoided. If not, the squad leader is alerted to possible OPFOR movement. If OPFOR activity is present, then the platoon leader notifies the mortar section sergeant to be ready to fire a mission near the checkpoint.

If the squad makes chance contact with an OPFOR element and sustains a casualty, the squad leader may decide to break contact and notify the platoon

leader to adjust fire on the checkpoint. The squad leader then designates a checkpoint in the vicinity of a trail as a linkup point for casualty evacuation. He then adjusts the indirect fires as the squad transports the casualty to that checkpoint, and the commander directs

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the front line ambulance to it. The squad links up with the ambulance, and the casualty is evacuated.

If the squad moves and determines that the disposition of the OPFOR is a squad at a supply point, the squad leader notifies the platoon leader, who relays the information to the commander. If the supply point is considered a high-payoff target, the commander then has several options. Using the checkpoints developed by the squad leader, he may position fixing forces along avenues of egress and send an element to link up with the squad leader at a checkpoint to facilitate a hasty attack. He can also have the squad leader adjust indirect fire on the supply point using the checkpoint as a reference point.

The squad leader started off this operation at a distinct disadvantage. He had limited planning time and scarce

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resources (one radio, for example, and no forward observer), but his initiative in planning checkpoints could have resulted in the synchronization of a company level attack. At least, he might have saved the life of one of his soldiers. Checkpoints are very basic in concept but can be vital to a successful operation when planning time is limited. Still, the leader must ensure that he observes several rules when he uses

checkpoints as the sole graphic control measure to synchronize his operation:

- Checkpoints must be on identifiable terrain so soldiers and other elements can easily recognize them on the ground.
- Too many checkpoints on a map may confuse soldiers.
- The graphics must be submitted to the next level of command, at the very least. Any adjacent units conducting patrols in the area should also be given copies of the graphics.
- The company mortars must also have the graphics.
- A few checkpoints must be placed near roads or trails to facilitate medical evacuation by ground. A checkpoint may also be placed near a landing zone to facilitate air evacuation.
- The unit's movement must be reported using the checkpoints. Every checkpoint must be called in so the next higher leader can follow the movement.

One technique is to designate checkpoints for objectives or unit locations. The leader memorizes what the checkpoint represents (tactical operations center location or Objective Red, for example). He can then conduct his mission with a map that has graphics but that will be useless to the OPFOR if he is compromised.

Additional graphics are usually necessary in complex operations such as attacks or in the defense. Experience at the JRTC has shown, however, that many units conduct these types of missions with only the graphics provided by their higher headquarters. Nonetheless, if leaders at all levels follow these simple guidelines, the checkpoint may be just the graphic control measure a unit most needs to synchronize its operations.

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